

WILEY

The Theory of Morality. by Alan Donagan
Review by: Roger Wertheimer
Noûs, Vol. 17, No. 2 (May, 1983), pp. 303-308
Published by: [Wiley](#)
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2215149>
Accessed: 26/02/2013 17:22

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Wiley is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Noûs*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

CRITICAL REVIEWS

Alan Donagan, *The Theory of Morality* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 278 pp.

ROGER WERTHEIMER

CARNEGIE-MELLON UNIVERSITY

Save for the impersonal respect I bare the twain of 'em, I cared not a fart for either. 'Tis a wise thing, Eben, not to confuse one affection with another.

John Barth *The Sot-Weed Factor*

Alan Donagan's *The Theory of Morality* presents itself as the legitimate heir of the "Hebrew-Christian tradition" of morality and moral theorizing dating back through Kant and Aquinas to the Stoics and Biblical and Talmudic thinkers. Coming from a respected philosopher and historian of philosophy within that tradition, Donagan's utterances merit our regard as representative statements exemplifying and evidencing central features of the history of our morality and moral theorizing. The strains within Donagan's theory are born of the marriage of competing strains within that tradition.

A morality, Donagan insists, is a set of precepts of conduct ascertainable by human reason and binding on any rational being by his being such. The Hebrew-Christian tradition developed this conception and, it claimed, a morality to match it. The traditional philosophical task Donagan assumes is to present (the nontheistic part of) morality as a philosophical system. All the various moral precepts are to be derived from a single fundamental *a priori* principle whose "canonical form" is: It is impermissible not to respect every human being, oneself or any other, as a rational creature. This principle in turn is to be defended by 'rationally compelling' considerations (even if not yet 'intuitively self-evident' considerations forming an *a priori* demonstration) deriving from the essential nature of rationality.

For Donagan, the various precepts (e.g., It is impermissible to kill a human being except in such and such circumstances) are to be deduced directly from the above fundamental principle of respect mediated only by "specificatory premises" that articulate and apply the concept of respecting-a-person-as-a-rational-creature (e.g., to kill a human being except in such and such circumstances is to fail to respect him as a rational creature). Allegedly, it is "possible to determine many specificatory premises with virtual certainty and many with a high degree of confidence" from the concurrence in the understanding of that concept by "those who share in the life of a culture in which the Hebrew-Christian moral tradition is accepted."

From these sleek assumptions Donagan produces in a single chapter the main precepts for assessing human action. The next chapter quickly analyzes agency and provides the precepts for judging it. The final chapters defend the theory against allegations of inconsistency and attacks by consequentialists, and attempt to supply the theory with a foundation. Throughout, erudition and

analytical talent are displayed. Despite the size of the book, its ambitions and scope are not modest. I shall focus on its central and distinctive feature, its conception and employment of the principle of respect for persons.

Few philosophers today reject the principle of respect and perhaps most accept it as being in some sense fundamental, yet disagreement abounds about just what that sense is. According to Ronald Dworkin's reading of Rawls the principle of respect generates the conditions defining the so-called 'original position' and then the derivation of the principles of justice follows, not directly from the principle of respect, but instead from the operation of the original position. Donagan accepts Dworkin's interpretation of Rawls and welcomes the Dworkin Rawls as an ally, not a competitor, because he supposes that the "contractarian hypothetical choice [Rawls] employs is no more than an expository device. . . ." However, as Norman Daniels [1] has convincingly argued, Dworkin's derivation of the conditions of the original position from the principle of respect is quite unpersuasive. Moreover, Rawls' own rejection of Donagan's enterprise seems sufficiently explicit in the closing pages of *A Theory of Justice*:

. . . the principle of justice are not derived from the notion of respect for persons, from a recognition of their inherent worth and dignity . . . the notion of respect or of the inherent worth of persons is not a suitable basis for arriving at these principles. It is precisely these ideas that call for interpretation . . . Without the principles of right and justice. . . the requirements of respect are undefined; they presuppose these principles already independently derived. (pp. 586-7)

Nozick too, for all his many disagreements with Rawls, may be expressing a similar position in the final paragraph of *Anarchy, State and Utopia* where he speaks of the just, minimal state "treating us with respect by respecting our rights," and of our "having individual rights with the dignity this constitutes." Such remarks suggest that our rights are the basis, not the consequences of the application of the principle of respect. Moreover, since Nozick presents a radically different package of rights from Donagan's and Rawls' and explicitly criticizes Rawls for violating the principle of respect, there seems to be a correspondingly radical disagreement over the implications of that principle as well as over its position in the structure of a moral theory.

Against allegations that the principle of respect does not coincide with the (presumed) precepts of morality it is a well established custom of Donagan's tradition to declare that the allegation rests on a confusion of respect for persons as rational creatures with something else, either another kind of respect or something other than respect (admiration and esteem are much favored for this role). This retort is pure ritual uncontaminated by argument. There exists no proof that the principle of respect must coincide with the precepts of morality, nor even a reason given for presuming it. Donagan's tradition has never provided a facsimile of a philosophically adequate description of what this thing, respect, is that it directs us to have. Instead we are given assorted claims about an odd lot of behavioral expressions of respect (Donagan's specificatory premises), but no characterization of respect by which one could test whether these behaviors are expressions of one and the same attitude. Not surprisingly, the tradition contains much muddlement about the nature of respect, and most commonly respect is mistaken for some member of the family of attitudes motivating beneficence: e.g., love, concern, sympathy, gratitude, benevolence.

Donagan provides a nice instance of this, for he first asserts without a word of argument that "the concept of respecting a human being as a rational creature is not usefully definable for our purposes," and then claims with the same quantity of argument that, though not useful, the concept can be defined as "treating a human being, by virtue of his rationality, as an end in itself," and later explains that an end in itself is a being for the sake of which one acts and illustrates this with a case of gratitude. Leave aside the problematic middle term, 'end-in-itself,' and we see a clear confusion of respect with something like love, for it is love and the like that motivate acting for the sake of their objects; as Kant well understood, respect differs in this regard. The civilly disobedient whose act evidences lack of respect for the law and the authority may well claim to be the true lover of his country who acts to save it from its errant mandates rather than blindly obey out of respect; at the same time he may well, out of respect, willingly submit to punishment for his disobedience.

This confounding infects some of Donagan's specificatory premises, most prominently that from which he derives his "principle of beneficence;" "it is impermissible not to promote the well-being of others by actions in themselves permissible, inasmuch as one can do so without disproportionate inconvenience." That plausible, albeit notoriously controversial principle is gotten by way of this indiscriminate premise: "If a man respects other men as rational creatures, not only will he not injure them, he will necessarily also take satisfaction in their achieving the well-being they seek, and will further their efforts as far as he prudently can." It is love-like attitudes that seek and take satisfaction in the well-being of their objects; respect does not take satisfaction at all, and does not aim at the good of its objects. Respect for truth may motivate honesty and candor, but not, as love of truth does, the quest for wisdom, certainty or scientific knowledge. We rescue drowning puppy dogs and pussy cats as we rescue persons, not from respect, but from something like sympathy. Donagan's defense of the principle of beneficence employs a conception of respect which itself is in need of defense. By contrast, libertarian theories like Nozick's differ from contractarian theories like Rawls' on this and related welfare principles (e.g., the "difference principle") due to differing roles of respect in these theories.¹

Donagan seems doubly confused about respect for he insists that respect is "a way of acting," and that to respect someone is to "treat" him a certain way. His theory demands this if only because he wants the precepts for permissible and impermissible acts (acts "objectively considered" wherein "no reference is made to the doer's state of mind in doing it") to be derived directly from the principle of respect. Thus to perform a morally prescribed (proscribed) act is to respect (fail to respect) someone, and is so quite independently of the agent's actuating attitudes, motives and intentions. This is one kind of respect, the behaving in accord with some law, norm or someone's wishes regarded as authoritative imperatives. Here, violating a law is failing to respect it, whatever the explanation for the violation may be and even whether it was intentional. But now, this purely behavioral respect cannot have as its object a human being (person, rational creature), but only something like his rights. On this reading, talk of respecting a person is simply a *façon de parler* for respecting his rights. And further, this principle of (behavioral) respect for persons cannot possibly be the fundamental moral principle since it presupposes and cannot provide a system of norms to be obeyed. The command to respect (behaviorally) a person (i.e., his rights) cannot itself specify what those rights are which are to be respected.

Normally when we speak of respecting a person we refer to a motivational attitude which may be expressed or shown by certain behavior but is not itself a 'way of acting.' It is to this attitude, not to some behavior, that we refer with such grammatical forms as 'having respect for someone (or some thing)' and 'acting out of (or from) respect for someone (or some thing.)' Donagan regularly employs such locutions and their intelligibility requires that respect be an attitude. Rawls seems prey to the same equivocation. His extreme pessimism about Donagan's project—"without the principles of right and justice . . . the requirements of respect are undefined"—is perhaps due to his there focusing solely on behavioral respect. Elsewhere, scattered throughout his book, he presents various "requirements of respect."

Again, an attitude such as respect is expressed (shown, evidenced) by certain behavior. That connection may be partly causal, partly conceptual, or some *tertium quid* philosophers have yet to comprehend. In any case, unless so-called logical behaviorism is true, there are no true statements of the form: If someone has attitude, R, then, no matter what else is true, he performs action, A (or refrains from action, B). From the principle that we are to respect (or love or whatever) persons, nothing can be directly deduced about the specific conduct we may or may not engage in. Donagan unwittingly concedes this by implication when he describes Falstaff as a man who, despite his frequent immoralities, maintained a respect for others. The concession seems unwitting since it challenges his derivational scheme according to which it must be impossible to obey the fundamental principle yet violate some subsidiary precept. The strain here comes from the conflation of attitudinal and behavioral respect which precludes any divergence.

Any theory in Donagan's tradition must explain the relations between behavioral and attitudinal directives, yet the whole matter is untracked territory. How an attitude is manifested in behavior depends upon all the rest of an individual's motivational system. We can say *in the abstract* what behavior will be motivated by an attitude only if, first, the attitude is the dominant (effective) motive, and secondly, no cognitive defect (e.g., false belief) misdirects. Yet even this twin idealization would suffice only if the attitude were simply a desire which did nothing but motivate the most effective means to its satisfaction. Love and respect resist all such reductions to a desire, for love contains a complex of interacting and often competing desires (so that the course of love runs not so smoothly) whereas respect contains no desires (except in the purely formal sense of 'desire' in which every intentional act is motivated by a desire). One mark of desire is that, barring internal conflict, success is experienced as satisfying, inherently pleasurable, whereas failure is experienced as frustration, painful. The wellspring of Christian morality is the inherent, natural joyousness of loving and giving to one's beloveds. Respect lacks any such relation to sensibility. Respecting someone is not itself pleasurable. Doing what respect motivates you to do may be independently pleasurable or at least a source of pride and the pleasures attendant thereon, just as failing to express the respect one has when an expression of respect is called for may be a cause of painful shame, but the latter is not the pain of frustrated desire and the former is not the contrary pleasure.

Further, to the extent that the expressive behavior is specifiable, doubts arise about the foundational role of respect. Notoriously, the principle of love seems to presuppose and be incapable of providing the principles of justice, for it directs us to seek the good of all alike and seems to provide no guidance where the good of different persons conflicts. The principle of respect seems to

meet a similar problem. Just as we may be unfair to someone by insulting him (showing disrespect for him), we may also insult someone by being unfair to him. By giving him less than his due we may expose him as powerless to secure what is his; by giving him more than his share we may present him as being weak and needful of special favors. In either case, what is insulting and disrespectful derives from the principles of fairness and thus seem incapable of accounting for them.

Apparently respect and love cannot begin to motivate anything approaching the full range of moral conduct without antecedently given principles. Moreover, unless restrained by such precepts they seem to readily motivate immoral activity. Love is the natural and major motivation for paternalistic interference and invasions of privacy. Respect presents rather different perils. One's respect for another may prompt one to feel too shy or unworthy to aid him or too ashamed or afraid to be truthful with him. Even the defeat and the very destruction of a thing may be impelled by respect for it and fear of shame before it. To this it may be retorted that the proper remedy is a healthy self respect, and since that is prescribed by the principle of universal respect, that principle cannot conflict with morality. This reply concedes that respect for others may express itself in immorality, and claims that the conflict with morality is precluded by self respect. Yet that conflict is precluded only if self respect is thought to be violated by violating antecedently given norms.

With some analytical ingenuity a structurally less elegant theory than Donagan's might overcome some of these difficulties. Certainly a more elaborate analysis of respect will be needed. It is needed for the historical analysis as well. Lacking it, Donagan's "Hebrew-Christian traditon" flattens out before him. He writes as though the concepts and precepts of liberalism—to give his moral view its proper name—were present in Biblical, Talmudic and Scholastic teachings, awaiting only the proper philosophical formulation Kant provided. Donagan perpetrates no original sin here; he merely perpetuates a mythical history hallowed in the tradition of liberalism that developed in a (post-) Christian culture by theorists unwilling to relinquish their religious allegiances and recognize their distance from their moral heroes.

Unlike a prohibition of murder, some version of which is found in every culture, and unlike a principle of universal love, some version of which is found in diverse cultures, the principle of respect is not to be found outside societies influenced by the liberal tradition. Perhaps every culture enjoins some kind of respect, but mainly it is rather some distant cousin of respect and even then it is to be directed only at select persons: e.g., the Fifth Commandment's directive to honor one's parents. Not till the end of the 18th century did anyone ever assert that we should respect every person (or human being). Indeed, before then no one could have asserted it, at least not in English, since 'respect' and more particularly 'self-respect' were not used in their present sense till then. Even if it could have been asserted, nothing suggests that anyone did or would have believed it then. Nowadays the principle of respect is uttered and received as a moral platitude no one dares publicly deny. A cultural—moral and personality—transformation of the first magnitude has transpired.

The Kantian claims of respect, intrinsic worth, inherent dignity are alien to early Christianity. The New Testament tells us God loves each of us and we are to model ourselves on Him. It is not said that we are loved by God or to be loved by others because we are loveable or valuable, which, by the way, is just as well since it is exceedingly strange to love someone because of his value or for his dignity. (Stranger still would it be to love someone because he is a rational

creature, unless that meant more rational than most folks). We are not worthy of or entitled to this love. Paul in particular insisted that we are inherently worthless and utterly undeserving of this love. It is a gratuitous love, freely given, unmotivated by any principle of practical reason. God owes us nothing, not love and least of all respect. To repeat, our attitude toward others is to be modeled on His attitude toward us, and His attitude toward us could not be respect.

The revolutionary character of the principle of respect lies not in its egalitarianism. The Christian ideology dominating pre-Enlightenment theory and practice was no less egalitarian in its conception of human beings as equal children of God, equal in His sight, loved equally by Him and thereby of equal transcendental value. This is an equality in relation to God. It is compatible with any degree of political, social and economic inequality. Being the object of this gratuitous love does not empower the beloved to demand anything from Him or anyone else. A lover does not grant his beloved any power or freedom unless he supposes it to be for the beloved's good. Love motivates paternalistic constraints. And love itself, like Medieval Christianity, has no principled unequivocal objection to slavery or serfdom. Love objects to cruelty, but not to control of the beloved compatible with the beloved's good. Love is moved not, as respect is, by consideration of its object's *will*, but, as respect is not, by consideration of its object's *good*. So too, love is no respecter of privacy. Love seeks intimacy, identification, union; respect requires distance, differentiation, individualization. Harmonizing those humors is cardinal in the Kantian ideal of friendship. Donagan's book presents the harmony as monotonic.

REFERENCES

- [1] Norman Daniels, "Reflective Equilibrium and Archimedean Points," in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 10(1980): 83-103, especially pp. 96-98.
- [2] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).
- [3] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

NOTES

- ¹ cf. my "Respecting Rights and Persons," presented at the Tenth Interamerican Congress of Philosophy, October, 1981.

Vinit Haksar, *Equality, Liberty, and Perfectionism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press (Clarendon Library of Logic and Philosophy), 1979), 302 pp.

NORMAN S. CARE

OBERLIN COLLEGE

Vinit Haksar is a critic of liberalism who wishes to enable it to overcome its problems. He has great respect for the liberal tradition, or that part of it which he calls "the liberal-egalitarian philosophy" or "egalitarianism with liberal implications," even while he is a critic of the liberal theories of, among others, Mill, Rawls, and Dworkin. His discussion is pitched at an advanced level in the